

The Forgotten Medium

A Survey of Recent Articles

During its heyday in the 1930s and '40s, radio was a national entertainment medium. Local stations belonged to networks—the National Broadcasting Company and the Columbia Broadcasting System—that offered comedy programs, action dramas, soap operas, and variety shows, and America listened, notes Boston College professor Marilyn J. Matelski in a special issue of *Freedom Forum's Media Studies Journal* (Summer 1993) devoted to the “forgotten” medium. But with the arrival of television, radio's character changed. Switching their attention to the new medium, networks stopped providing radio stations with entertainment fare aimed at a general audience. The stations turned to prerecorded music and “disc jockeys,” and soon began to specialize in different formats to appeal to selected target audiences, such as rock 'n' roll for teenagers. Radio became a local medium—and so it has largely remained. In recent years, however, there has been an increase in radio with national appeal, observes Sean Ross, associate editor of *M Street Journal*, a radio-industry newsletter.

Conservative talkmeister Rush Limbaugh, the self-described “Doctor of Democracy,” now is heard on almost 600 radio stations and reaches nearly 16 million people each week. Garrison Keillor, the creator of “A Prairie Home Companion,” is also a national star, thanks to public radio. (Of the nation's 11,338 radio stations, 1,592 are noncommercial.) Networks that distribute programming by means of Earth-orbiting satellites now cover about 20 percent of America's stations and are proliferating, Ross says. Once digital audio broadcasting (DAB) wins Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approval and becomes a reality, “the end of commercial radio as we know it” may be at hand, Ross says. DAB will carry compact-disc-quality audio but on only a limited number of channels. The commission already has five applications for DAB satellite systems.

This will not be the first upheaval in radio-land. AM radio, with slightly more than half (4,961 in 1992) of the nation's 9,746 commercial

stations, had most of the listening audience just 20 years ago; now, however, AM may be on the verge of extinction, according to Michael C. Keith of the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago. “Beginning in the late 1960s, AM's listenership declined as FM fine-tuned its sound. AM signals have wider geographic reach, but FM stereo sound is better. In 1977, AM still had over half of the radio audience, but listeners ‘voted with their ears,’ as one media historian put it, and migrated to FM.” In many markets today, AM claims barely 15 percent of the audience.

The rise of talk radio has been a kind of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation for some AM stations. All but five of the 591 stations on which Limbaugh's mighty voice is heard are on the AM band. Yet many of these are in financial trouble, reports Skidmore College English professor Tom Lewis; several have filed for bankruptcy.

“Unlike newspapers or television, radio is a fiercely competitive business with little financial margin for error,” Richard J. MacDonald, a media analyst for a New York investment firm, points out. From 1982 to '86, trading in radio stations was intense: More than half of all commercial radio stations changed hands. But many buyers lost out. The value of stations crashed after 1987, with the average station price nationwide plummeting from \$4.3 million in 1988 to \$1.3 million in 1992. Advertising spending dried up and banks stopped lending to potential buyers of radio stations. By mid-1992, more than half of all stations were losing money.

Two actions by the federal government have eased the radio crisis. Lighter bank regulation has saved some station owners from bankruptcy. And in 1992 the FCC lifted a rule imposed during the 1930s that prevented an individual operator from owning more than one station in the same market. These two actions, MacDonald says, “already are driving the radio industry to consolidation. Inevitably, market forces will ensure that radio groups will become larger and more corporate. In the end the

stand-alone station in a small market with a singular personality, a unique voice, a quirky and

even risky format will be absorbed, forgotten, or left to public funding."

Up in Flames

"It Didn't Start with *Dateline NBC*" by Walter Olson, in *National Review* (June 21, 1993), 150 E. 35th St., New York, N.Y. 10016.

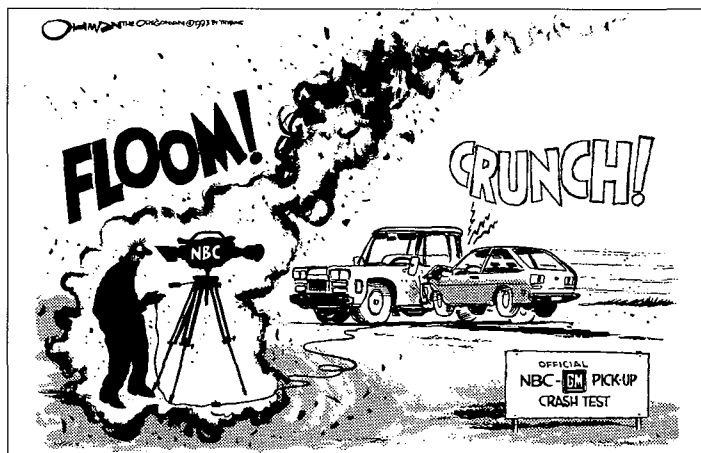
When NBC News admitted earlier this year that the dramatic crash test shown on a "Dateline NBC" broadcast last November had been rigged, the fiasco was widely portrayed as, in the words of the *Los Angeles Times*, "an unprecedented disaster in the annals of network news." The use of hidden toy-rocket engines to ensure that the GM truck burst into flames was "not something anybody at '60 Minutes' would do," declared Don Hewitt, executive producer of the long-running CBS news show. Olson, a Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, maintains that in fact the same sort of thing *has* happened on "60 Minutes" and other network news shows.

Fourteen years before the "Dateline NBC" broadcast, viewers of ABC's "20/20" saw a crash fire and explosion—and were not told it was started with an incendiary device. It was June 1978 and the outcry about the Ford Pinto was at its height. "20/20" reported "startling" evidence that many full-size Ford models could also explode when hit from behind. Film was aired from "secret" tests done at UCLA in 1967 by researchers working under contract to the automaker, and it showed "a Ford sedan being rear-ended at 55 m.p.h. and bursting into a fireball." Viewers were not told that in a published report 10 years earlier the testers explained that they had wanted to study the effect of a crash fire on a car's passenger compartment and, since crash fires happened very rarely, they had used an incendiary device to produce one.

"Perhaps the best-known

and best-refuted auto-safety scare of recent years," Olson says, was a "60 Minutes" attack in 1986 on the Audi 6000. "The Audi, it seemed, was a car possessed by demons. It would back into garages, dart into swimming pools, plow into bank-teller lines, everything but fly on broomsticks, all while its hapless drivers were standing on the brake—or at least so they said." The Audi's accelerator and brake pedals were closer together and farther to the left than those in many American cars, but "60 Minutes" investigators did not think that drivers were simply hitting the wrong pedal. Film was shown of an Audi mysteriously accelerating while reporter Ed Bradley told viewers to "watch the pedal go down by itself." The demonstration had been prepared by a man who testified as an expert witness against the carmaker and who was quoted by "60 Minutes" as saying that "unusually high transmission pressure" could build up and cause problems. Bradley did not tell viewers, however, that the expert "had drilled a hole in the . . . car's transmission and attached a hose leading to a tank of compressed air or fluid."

That was not the only time "60 Minutes" stooped to conquer, according to Olson:



NBC News was ridiculed when it was revealed that a "Dateline NBC" crash was rigged. But NBC was the last network to get into "dubious safety journalism in a big way," Olson says, and the only one to apologize.